

PROTECTING OUR VETERANS

The SPEAKER pro tempore. Under the Speaker's announced policy of January 4, 2021, the Chair recognizes the gentleman from Pennsylvania (Mr. KELLER) until 10 p.m.

GENERAL LEAVE

Mr. KELLER. Madam Speaker, I ask unanimous consent that each Member may have 5 legislative days to revise and extend their remarks.

The SPEAKER pro tempore. Is there objection to the request of the gentleman from Pennsylvania?

There was no objection.

Mr. KELLER. Madam Speaker, my distinguished colleagues and I stand here on behalf of America's veterans. The last thing our veterans should be burdened with is any delay, let alone a prolonged wait time to access the benefits and programs they have earned through their service.

The National Personnel Records Center is responsible for processing these records, and at this moment, there is a backlog of more than half a million requests, some dating back to February of 2020. Consequently, some veterans have been waiting for over a year and a half for copies of their service records which are needed to access VA benefits, adjudicate disability claims, request campaign service medals, and much more.

We in the United States of America honor the service and sacrifice of our veterans and Active Duty military personnel, and any delay for them is unacceptable.

That is why we introduced the RECORDS Act, legislation that would compel the National Personnel Records Center to take the necessary actions to eliminate the growing backlog of veterans' record requests.

Dating back more than a year, there has been a broad, bipartisan push to deliver for our veterans and work toward addressing the National Personnel Records Center's unacceptable backlog. The RECORDS Act is an opportunity to achieve this.

Our veterans fought for us. We must always fight for them. I appreciate my colleagues joining me this evening together in support of this goal.

Madam Speaker, I yield to the gentleman from Florida (Mr. RUTHERFORD).

Mr. RUTHERFORD. Madam Speaker, I thank the gentleman for yielding, and I thank my good friend from Pennsylvania for this opportunity.

Madam Speaker, I rise today to talk about one of the fundamental roles for a Member of Congress, and that is to help our constituents navigate the Federal bureaucracy and get the documents or benefits that they need and they deserve. This is especially true for veterans, who often run into difficulty at the VA, even when it is not the VA's fault.

Unfortunately, the National Personnel Records Center is still today not fully open, and this is after we gave

them money in last year's appropriations bill to safely reopen during the COVID-19 pandemic. This has prevented caseworkers in my office from properly assisting my constituents in a timely manner.

In fact, there is a backlog that was just mentioned of over 500,000 requests from veterans and their families—over 500,000. To fix this problem, I am proud to support the RECORDS Act, and I urge the Speaker to bring to this bill to the floor.

This bill will ensure that the National Personnel Records Center is operating full time and at fully-staffed capacity now. American veterans deserve better than what they are currently getting from this administration. Let's pass the RECORDS Act.

Mr. KELLER. Madam Speaker, I thank my colleague for joining us this evening and so very well put about making sure that we help our veterans and the fact that the records center had the resources in previous legislation. We just need to make sure that they get the job done. I thank the gentleman for joining us.

Madam Speaker, I yield to the gentlewoman from Florida (Mrs. CAMMACK).

Mrs. CAMMACK. I rise today, Madam Speaker, to speak in support of the RECORDS Act to make urgently needed reforms to the National Personnel Records Center which has failed our Nation's veterans through a critical time.

I would like to share a recent story from my district about a 99-year-old marine who has been suffering from Alzheimer's. Her family has been attempting to obtain her DD-214 form to apply for her VA pension. This would grant her a placement in a nursing home equipped to handle an Alzheimer's patient. However, the National Personnel Records Center has put an indefinite delay on sending her records to her and her loved ones.

Their justification in writing: this request does not constitute a medical emergency. She is 99 years old. She dedicated her life to serving our country as a marine and is suffering from a debilitating disease. As if this excuse was not poor enough, the center also demanded that the family prove that she has been separated for 60 years or more to justify pulling the records. Again, this is a 99-year-old marine veteran.

The National Personnel Records Center can no longer be allowed to lean on the crutches of COVID. This is their excuse to justify their dereliction of duty. They have an obligation to fulfill these claims for our Nation's veterans who have served our country bravely. If the National Personnel Records Center does their job and still feels no shame in letting veterans' care lapse while their needed records requests go unfulfilled to the tune of 500,000-plus nationally, hundreds within Florida's Third Congressional District—constituents of mine—then it is time for us in Congress to intervene.

Madam Speaker, I urge the House to immediately take up this legislation. Excuses be damned.

□ 2140

Mr. KELLER. Madam Speaker, I thank the gentlewoman for those remarks. What an outstanding lady that the gentlewoman represents.

The gentlewoman mentioned something that really makes me think of something when you talk about excuses. I was raised by my grandmother, and I can remember her telling me one time, my brother and I, she looked at us and said: Boys, people that make excuses are weak.

It is time that we show strength, and we make them do their job.

Madam Speaker, I yield to the gentleman from Georgia (Mr. CLYDE), my good colleague and friend.

Mr. CLYDE. I thank the gentleman from Pennsylvania (Mr. KELLER), my good friend and colleague, for yielding.

Madam Speaker, veterans and their families have made many sacrifices for our great Nation. Through their service, these men and women have earned numerous benefits, and those benefits are validated by the member's individual service record.

The repository for those records is the National Personnel Records Center. The center is behind in its work. With the pandemic, the backlog to obtain military records jumped from 56,000 to over 500,000 requests. That is a tenfold increase.

That is 500,000 veterans and their families who are waiting on documentation that they need to apply for and receive benefits that they earned, including the GI Bill education benefits, VA loans, medical benefits, disability compensation, life insurance, and even burial benefits for their families.

When these issues were first reported last year, the National Personnel Records Center stated that the pandemic prevented their employees from being able to process record requests in a safe environment. As such, Congress appropriated additional funds to address the center's concerns and to help expedite the digitization of records.

However, the center did not grant its employees the proper technology to work from home during the pandemic until early 2021, nearly a year after the pandemic began. This choice by the center only compounded the worsening backlog.

Also, the Archivist of the United States, who oversees the NPRC's operations, noted in his latest correspondence to Congress that he expects the center to eliminate the backlog of veteran requests by the end of fiscal year 2022. That means this time next year, a whole year. This is simply unacceptable.

Each Member of this body has at least one veteran in their district impacted by this backlog, probably many, many veterans. It is time for all of us

to step up to the plate to demand results. Show us that these record requests are being processed in a timely manner.

I commend Representative KELLER for spearheading this tonight to fix this issue. Part of that is through the introduction of his bill, the RECORDS Act. I appreciate his efforts very much, and I am proud to join him in this fight. I thank him for the invitation to participate.

Mr. KELLER. Madam Speaker, I thank Representative CLYDE for his remarks and recognizing that there are veterans across our Nation in every district we have the privilege to represent.

The gentleman mentioned the records center not wanting to—worried about danger. Well, our veterans didn't worry about danger when they went to protect our freedom and our way of life.

I am glad to be joined by my great friend and colleague from Pennsylvania, Representative KELLY.

Madam Speaker, I yield to the gentleman from Pennsylvania (Mr. KELLY).

Mr. KELLY of Pennsylvania. Madam Speaker, Representative KELLER and I indeed are very good friends and in complete agreement on what it is we are trying to do tonight.

Madam Speaker, there are 54,511 veterans in Pennsylvania's 16th Congressional District. These are men and women that have served in all types of activities in the military.

Nearly 1 in 13 of my constituents are military veterans. Roughly 520,000 pending VA claims for disability, compensation, and benefits are out there right now. And 191,000 of those that are considered to be backlogged are older than 3 months old, 4 months old, and they can't even get the information that they need.

Thirty-six percent of these cases this summer were considered backlogged. Again, over 4 months, these people are waiting for their records to be pulled.

The National Personnel Records Center is operating at 45 percent of its pre-pandemic capacity—45 percent—while almost every other business and government entity is operating at full capacity.

This delay prevents veterans from getting the benefits they deserve for months or even years. A lack of digital records prevents staff from accessing those records while working remotely during the pandemic.

Representative KELLER's bill would require the National Personnel Records Center employees to return to the job at 100 percent of capacity and improve the efficiency and responsiveness of the operations at the center.

This is not just a request. This is honoring the service of those who have given all to defend this country.

They are not looking for anything special. They are not looking for anything out of the ordinary. They are not looking for anybody to go beyond what

they were hired to do. All they are asking for is for their records to be processed in the right time so they can receive their benefits.

How can this Nation turn its back, and how can this group refuse to do this in a timely fashion and prevent this from happening further?

All we are asking for is people to do their jobs. What an unusual concept for somebody to go to work every day and be asked to do their job, not doing it from home, but going on the job and actually doing the job for those who put their lives on the line for this Nation.

Incredible that it would take a bill from Congress for people to actually do the job they were hired to do and fulfill their responsibility to our incredible veterans.

I thank Representative KELLER for bringing this forward, and I would urge this body to take a look at what we are doing right now and somehow come to an agreement that there is not—this shouldn't be a request. This is a responsibility to those who have served us so well.

I thank Representative KELLER for including me tonight and all the rest of my colleagues.

Again, this is not just a request. This is a responsibility.

Mr. KELLER. Madam Speaker, I thank the gentleman for making a very valid point, that the rest of America is going back to work and doing what they need to do at full capacity, working at 100 percent. To have a government agency working at 45 percent, as the gentleman pointed out, for those who have done so much for us is unacceptable. I appreciate his help with this.

I also look forward to hearing what my great colleague and friend from Wisconsin has to say.

Madam Speaker, I yield to the gentleman from Wisconsin (Mr. GROTHMAN).

Mr. GROTHMAN. Madam Speaker, I would also like to speak on behalf of Congressman KELLER's bill.

One of the things we do as Congressmen back in our district is constituent work. Probably one of the areas which we are busiest in is the areas of helping our veterans. Whether it is getting burial benefits, veteran benefits, or lost military awards, we have to contact the National Personnel Records Center.

Unfortunately, as has been mentioned, for over a year now, the National Personnel Records Center has been operating at well under capacity. This is an insult to our veterans.

Their excuse for not operating is, of course, the COVID. My staff has toured the National Personnel Records Center, and it is a large warehouse, very spread out. Unlike where most Americans have had to work the last 2 years, you are not squeezed up in a cubicle next to somebody else.

Unfortunately—and this maybe is an indication of the overall caring of the Federal Government. Unfortunately,

they have not been open at a time when not only our veterans have given so much, but a time when so many taxpayers have been working around the clock.

Every night I go home, I go by a couple of cheese factories. I can drive by there at 1 in the morning. They are packed with people. They never stopped working.

Here we have a massive warehouse with lots of space between people, and we are told it is too dangerous to go to work. That is preposterous. It is an insult to our veterans. It is an insult to our taxpayers.

I urge this body to pass Congressman KELLER's bill as soon as possible.

Mr. KELLER. Madam Speaker, I thank the gentleman for his comments, so very well put, that we have people for which we work that are veterans that go to work every day, that maybe aren't veterans but taxpayers that go to work every day and expect our government to work. That is all we are asking for.

People every day in America go to work, and they produce goods, they provide services. The Americans that have served, our veterans, and those that are serving deserve a government that is responsive to the needs that they have because of what they have earned.

They are not asking for anything special. They are saying: Look, we have earned these benefits, and to gain access to them, we need you to do your job.

Who would have thought it would have taken an act of Congress to try and get them to do their work. It is time that we make sure that the National Personnel Records Center does its job for our veterans and to make sure that they have a plan that this never happens again.

We cannot let down our veterans because of some bureaucracy, because somebody doesn't want to make sure that it runs efficiently and effectively.

□ 2150

It needs to be done. It needs to be done now.

Madam Speaker, just let me say, we must first and always remember our veterans and Active Duty military personnel.

Also, I would like to thank my colleagues for their participation this evening. This is an important issue. It is widespread, and it transcends party lines.

These are veterans. They are Americans. They are not Republicans; they are not Democrats. They are Americans, and they are an outstanding group of Americans.

I notice I was just joined here by a colleague of mine. So before I close, I will recognize a gentleman I have known for quite some time, actually a member of the military. When I knew him, he was still a member of the military, so a veteran then, a good friend of mine, a great American from Pennsylvania.

Madam Speaker, I yield to the gentleman from Pennsylvania (Mr. PERRY).

Mr. PERRY. Madam Speaker, I thank my friend, the gentleman from Pennsylvania, for bringing up the subject and offering me the opportunity to stand in support of his legislation, the RECORDS Act, to let you know, what you have probably heard, that literally hundreds of thousands—500,000 to 600,000 veterans are awaiting their care based on the inability of the VA to get to their records.

They can't prove that they are due the care, that they have earned the care, without the records. The VA has this backlog, which takes them a year, maybe two, where they can't access their records to get the care that they have earned. So I commend the gentleman for his efforts with the RECORDS Act.

I have a similar bill, the WINGMAN Act, which allows congressional staffers, given the appropriate approvals, to go in and help the veteran do the same thing, get through the backlog.

Mr. KELLER has a response. He has a solution. I am working on a solution. Who is not working on a solution? The VA. It is not the people down in the trenches, down doing the hard work. As usual, it is the administration, the upper staff, that has failed in this endeavor.

If we can do anything in the United States of America—of all the billions

we spend, here and across the globe, anywhere, and all the different programs that we have—the least we can do is take care of those who have safeguarded our freedoms and have earned the care that they deserve to get. The only thing that stands between them and that care is accessing their records. They cannot right now because of this backlog.

The good gentleman from Pennsylvania (Mr. KELLER) has legislation that will fix that, and I urge my colleagues to support it. I urge everybody that is a veteran or a family member supportive of a veteran to write, to contact their Congressman, their Member of Congress, and urge them to support this legislation.

Let's see if we can fix the circumstances at the VA for these veterans.

Mr. KELLER. Madam Speaker, I thank my good friend, Mr. PERRY, who said it so very well. These people earned their benefits. Our veterans earned these benefits. They protected our freedom and way of life. They didn't question was it too dangerous to go do that job. They went and did it. They have earned benefits.

What we need to do is we need to make sure that the bureaucrats that are running this—as he said, it is not the people that get the work done every day, but it is the managers of the National Personnel Records Center that need to make sure they do their

job and put together a plan to address the issues, to get our veterans the necessary records, in a timely fashion, that they need to gain access to the benefits they have earned.

As I mentioned before, this is an issue that is not a Republican or Democrat issue. It is an American issue, and it is about helping Americans who have helped humanity from around the globe, stood up for freedom, stood on that wall and made sure we were safe. Now, it is our time to stand up for them and make sure they get the benefits they have earned.

We all urge the National Archives and Records Administration to immediately take all steps to address this problem and prevent it from ever happening again.

Madam Speaker, I yield back the balance of my time.

ADJOURNMENT

The SPEAKER pro tempore. Pursuant to section 11(b) of House Resolution 188, the House stands adjourned until 10 a.m. tomorrow for morning-hour debate and noon for legislative business.

Thereupon (at 9 o'clock and 54 minutes p.m.), under its previous order, the House adjourned until tomorrow, Tuesday, October 26, 2021, at 10 a.m. for morning-hour debate.

EXPENDITURE REPORTS CONCERNING OFFICIAL FOREIGN TRAVEL

Reports concerning the foreign currencies and U.S. dollars utilized for Official Foreign Travel during the third quarter of 2021, pursuant to Public Law 95-384, are as follows:

REPORT OF EXPENDITURES FOR OFFICIAL FOREIGN TRAVEL, DELEGATION TO GERMANY AND ITALY, EXPENDED BETWEEN AUG. 25 AND AUG. 31, 2021

Name of Member or employee	Date		Country	Per diem ¹		Transportation		Other purposes		Total	
	Arrival	Departure		Foreign currency	U.S. dollar equivalent or U.S. currency ²	Foreign currency	U.S. dollar equivalent or U.S. currency ²	Foreign currency	U.S. dollar equivalent or U.S. currency ²	Foreign currency	U.S. dollar equivalent or U.S. currency ²
Hon. David Price	8/25	8/28	Germany		801.53						801.53
Hon. Vern Buchanan	8/25	8/28	Germany		801.53						801.53
Hon. Gerry Connolly	8/25	8/28	Germany		801.53						801.53
Hon. Cheryl Johnson	8/25	8/28	Germany		801.53						801.53
Admiral Brian Monahan	8/25	8/28	Germany		801.53						801.53
Derek Luyten	8/25	8/28	Germany		801.53						801.53
Justin Wein	8/25	8/28	Germany		801.53						801.53
Sean Brady	8/25	8/28	Germany		801.53						801.53
Collin Davenport	8/25	8/28	Germany		801.53						801.53
Hon. David Price	8/28	8/31	Italy		1,512.00		17,398.35				18,910.35
Hon. Vern Buchanan	8/28	8/31	Italy		1,512.00		12,053.55				13,565.55
Hon. Gerry Connolly	8/28	8/31	Italy		1,512.00		13,832.95				15,344.95
Hon. Diana DeGette	8/28	8/31	Italy		1,512.00		5,451.05				6,966.05
Hon. Cheryl Johnson	8/28	8/31	Italy		1,512.00		2,482.55				3,994.55
Admiral Brian Monahan	8/28	8/31	Italy		1,512.00		2,502.85				4,014.85
Derek Luyten	8/28	8/31	Italy		1,512.00		2,455.85				3,967.85
Justin Wein	8/28	8/31	Italy		1,512.00		11,105.85				12,617.85
Sean Brady	8/28	8/31	Italy		1,512.00		2,455.85				3,967.85
Collin Davenport	8/28	8/31	Italy		1,512.00		2,296.35				3,808.35
Committee total					15,120.00		72,035.20				94,371.97

¹ Per diem constitutes lodging and meals.

² If foreign currency is used, enter U.S. dollar equivalent; if U.S. currency is used, enter amount expended.

HON. DAVID E. PRICE, Sept. 28, 2021.

REPORT OF EXPENDITURES FOR OFFICIAL FOREIGN TRAVEL, COMMITTEE ON HOUSE ADMINISTRATION, HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES, EXPENDED BETWEEN JULY 1 AND SEPT. 30, 2021

Name of Member or employee	Date		Country	Per diem ¹		Transportation		Other purposes		Total	
	Arrival	Departure		Foreign currency	U.S. dollar equivalent or U.S. currency ²	Foreign currency	U.S. dollar equivalent or U.S. currency ²	Foreign currency	U.S. dollar equivalent or U.S. currency ²	Foreign currency	U.S. dollar equivalent or U.S. currency ²

HOUSE COMMITTEES

Please Note: If there were no expenditures during the calendar quarter noted above, please check the box at right to so indicate and return. ☐

¹ Per diem constitutes lodging and meals.